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ABSTRACT

As advancements in communication technologies increase, so do the opportunities for communicating with people from different cultures. As contacts increase, so does the awareness of the misunderstanding that often arises in the process of communication. For example, different cultures have different modes of verbal behavior. This paper examines some of the implications which different verbal styles have for listening. W.B. Gudykunst and S. Ting-Toomey (1988) have identified four verbal communication styles across cultures: direct versus indirect, elaborate versus succinct, personal versus contextual, and instrumental versus affective. The paper discusses these four styles concluding that those verbal communication styles are learned within the cultural context of the users, and suggesting that to be more adept at intercultural listening a person needs to be familiar with these various styles and the main values that they reflect. (NKA)

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Verbal Communication Styles: Some Implications for Intercultural Listening

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Verbal Communication Styles: Some Implications for Intercultural Listening

Introduction

We live in a world that is increasingly becoming a global village. As advancements in communication technologies increase so do the opportunities for communicating with people from different cultures. These opportunities result in increased contacts among people. As contacts increase, so does the awareness of the misunderstanding that often arises in the process of communication. Some of the misunderstanding is due to listening problems and many of these problems are due to differences in speaking styles. Differences in speaking styles are largely influenced by culture. Thus, different cultures have different modes of verbal behavior. This paper examines some of the implications which different verbal styles have for listening.

Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) identify the five stages of active listening as hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. They point out that each of the five stages is affected by cultural factors. For example, they note that cultures that learn by rote may place less emphasis on or may even discourage evaluating a message. Likewise, cultures that associate silence with politeness may refrain from asking a speaker a question. Thomlison (1991) has noted that when the processes of receiving, attending, and assigning meanings to messages are influenced by cultural differences, we have intercultural communication.

In his classification of cultures Hall (1976) distinguishes between high-context and low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, meaning is often embedded in the physical context of interaction or is internalized in those participating in the interaction. In contrast, low-context cultures rely more on the use of precise and specific words for

meaning. Samovar and Porter (1994) sum up the major differences between high-context and low-context cultures as follows. First, the importance of verbal messages to low-context cultures is very high. Second, because of the primary reliance on verbal messages, people from high-context cultures perceive those from low-context cultures as less credible. Third, people from high-context cultures are more skilled in reading nonverbal cues. And fourth, people in high-context cultures do not speak much since they expect that others are also skilled at reading nonverbal cues. (For an earlier discussion of the importance of listening to nonverbal cues in intercultural interactions, see Oludaja, 1992). The second major difference noted above is particularly significant for our discussion of the effects of verbal communication styles on listening. The credibility of a speaker becomes more significant when the listener is evaluating the message.

Verbal Communication Styles

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) have identified four verbal communication styles across cultures: direct versus indirect, elaborate versus succinct, personal versus contextual, and instrumental versus affective. The direct stylistic mode involves the use of explicit verbal messages to communicate the speaker's wants, needs, and desires. Many Western cultures prefer the direct style. Unlike the direct mode, the indirect mode involves the use of verbal messages to conceal a speaker's wants, needs, and goals. This is the mode preferred by many Asian cultures. For example, rather than disagree or flatly say "no", many Asians would express their disagreement in an indirect way such as saying that they "agree in principle." Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey point out that cultures that emphasize group harmony use "imprecise, ambiguous verbal

communication behaviors" to accomplish their objective of harmony and conformity (p. 104).

One implication that the difference in direct-indirect verbal style could have for listening is that those who are used to the direct style might find it difficult to understand what people who use the indirect style mean. Since the direct style emphasizes precision of words the use of ambiguity might make it harder to listen and more tempting to tune out messages. Equally, users of the indirect style might be tempted to tune out a speaker who uses the direct style because s/he might be perceived as impolite and insensitive.

The dimension of elaborate-succinct style deals with the richness or exactness or succinctness of verbal expressions. Many Middle Eastern cultures use the elaborate style. For instance, Arab speakers use what appears to North Americans to be exaggeration, over-assertion, and repetition. Sometimes, the words used are more important than the events those words describe. Specificity is not considered an obligation, so long as the listener is able to infer meaning. (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). An implication for listening is that someone who is unaware of the Arabic verbal style could easily infer an incorrect meaning. Sometimes such misunderstandings lead to problems in international relations (Cohen, 1987). In contrast to the elaborate mode of Middle Eastern cultures, Japanese and Chinese verbal styles tend to be succinct. Klopf (1987) has noted that the significant feature of Japanese language life is the desire not to speak. The Japanese prefer to be less talkative and tend to consider expressed thoughts and feelings as superficial and insincere. The Chinese verbal style is characterized by understatements. They often feel embarrassed when showered with verbal praise and compliments (Gudykunst & Kim,

1984). Such embarrassment may affect one's ability to respond to praise and compliments in a way that is expected in cultures that use the elaborate style.

The personal-contextual dimension also has implication for listening. The personal style uses language that centers on the individual and enhances the individual's identity. It is characterized by greater informality than is the case with the contextual style. Meanings that are expressed are aimed at emphasizing "personhood". The contextual style is more formal and emphasizes social status. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) remark:

> In commenting on the Japanese language, Okabe (1983) contends that English is a person-oriented language, while Japanese is a status-oriented language. The key distinction is that a person-oriented language stresses informality and symmetrical power relationships, while a status-oriented or contextual-oriented language emphasizes formality and asymmetrical power relationships (p. 110).

Other languages such as Korean and Indian English have been identified as contextual-oriented. The difference in emphasis on egalitarianism or hierarchy may cause noise in an interaction between people using the different styles.

The instrumental-affective dimension deals with whether a verbal style is goal-oriented or process-oriented. Verbal exchange that is sender-oriented, goal-oriented, and is heavily digital, is considered instrumental in style. Verbal exchange that is receiver-oriented, process-oriented, and is heavily analogic is considered affective in style. Like all the other dimensions, the instrumental-affective verbal style has its implication for listening. To be an effective listener, one needs a purpose for listening. If the listener's purpose is goal-directed and the speaker is process-oriented, listening effectively becomes more challenging.

Conclusion

The number of people and countries studying and using English is growing. But as Samovar and Porter (1991) have noted, when several nations use a particular language, some cultural carryover can be expected. Such carryover has implication for listeners from different cultures. For instance, Lustig & Koester (1999) have indicated that in English, which is a speaker-responsible language, the speaker is expected to provide the structure and much of the meaning of his/her statement. Thus the speaker previews his/her message. But in Japanese, which is a listener-responsible language, the burden of constructing the meaning is largely on the listener. It would not be surprising, therefore, if a native speaker of Japanese used the Japanese structure while conveying a message in English. But it would be more challenging for the native English-speaking listener to construct the speaker's meaning.

This paper has briefly examined some of the implications that four verbal communication styles can have for listening. These verbal styles are learned within the cultural contexts of the users. Hence, the styles also reflect cultural values. To be more adept at intercultural listening one needs to be familiar with these various styles and the main values that they reflect. A speaker/listener's adaptation to a particular style will depend on a variety of factors such as the interactants, their purpose, the importance of the encounter, and the time (both as location and as duration).

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